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Adults with Disabilities and The Accommodation Communication in Higher Education

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Abstract. This qualitative study describes the accommodation communication as it occurs between faculty in higher education and students with visible and invisible disabilities. Elements of an accommodation communication model are: (a) disclosure, (b) validation, (c) request, (d) responsibility, (e) timing, and (f) negotiation.

The disability rights movement began in the fall of 1962 with Ed Roberts's decision to choose a school based on his academic needs not his disability (Shapiro, 1993). In 1962, only four university campuses were accessible to individuals with disabilities. Children with disabilities were not guaranteed an education nor was there a legally protected right to an accessible education for non-veterans until the seventies. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (P. L. 93-112) containing Section 504 made it illegal for any federal agency, public university, or recipient of federal funds to discriminate against an individual on the basis of a disability. Section 504 prevents exclusion based on disability status (Mangrum & Strichert, 1988) and provides students an equal opportunity to achieve equal results (Biehl, 1978). It is the responsibility of individual to disclose and to request an accommodation beginning the obligation of the postsecondary institution to accommodate the individual with the disability (Jarrow, 1993). Accommodation is "an adjustment to the learning environment that does not compromise the essential elements of a course or curriculum" (Schuck & Kroeger, 1993; p. 63). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (P. L. 101-336) (ADA) expands protection to include all private and public educational programs and services be accessible to individuals with disabilities (Duston & Provan, 1995). According to the ADA, a disability "means, with respect to an individual--a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment" (P. L. 101-336; §3). Learning is considered a major life activity.

Method. The purpose was to examine the accommodation communication process and factors affecting it. Interview data were analyzed using a constant comparative method to generate grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three samples were compared; composed of 9 faculty, 8 students with visible disabilities, and 7 students with invisible disabilities. A visible disability is easily seen or suspected by another person, for instance people that use wheel chairs and other tools for mobility. An invisible disability is one that cannot be seen or suspected by a lay person. Examples of invisible disabilities are learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, and psychiatric disabilities. Members of each sample answered questions about disclosure, describing the disability, reactions of others, requesting an accommodation, and coaching or advice

received. Interviews lasted forty-five to ninety minutes. Transcripts were checked against the audiotapes, read, and re-read for coding. Several months went by between work on each sample to allow categories to emerge from each sample independently. Comparisons between samples were made after all samples were coded, and categories written up into descriptive text (Wolcott, 1994).

Accommodation Communication Model. The findings come from the data and are in no way meant as an interpretation of the law. An accommodation communication model emerged from the data with elements identified from conversations with participants in each sample. Accommodation communication is the act of requesting access to the materials, documents, and information provided by an instructor to facilitate or enhance learning the course content. Elements of the accommodation communication are: (a) disclosure, (b) validation, (c) request, (d) responsibility, (e) timing, and (f) negotiation. Each section includes a definition of the element, a description of its relationship to the process, and an exploration of each sample's experiences with the process.

The process starts with a disclosure regarding the disability or an access need. Disclosure is accompanied by validation of the information which can occur as a formal request for documentation or by tacit acceptance of the disclosure by an instructor. After a request for accommodation occurs, it creates the responsibility to provide accommodations on the part of the instructor, institution, or employer. The importance and credibility of the disclosure is based upon the timing of the request and the way negotiations proceed. As the student and instructor negotiate, the student communicates his or her needs, and the instructor imparts her or his expectations of academic performance. A successful negotiation process defines mutually acceptable goals.

Disclosure. Disclosure is the act of providing personal information to another person (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Chelune (1979) claims disclosure's importance is derived from the amount of comfort the receiver obtains from the communication. The data that emerged in this study, however, do not entirely support Chelune. For participants with visible disabilities, most often disclosure was done with the goal of making the recipient of the information feel more comfortable. In the case of participants with invisible disabilities, disclosing did not generally make the receiver or the participant feel more comfortable. In fact, disclosure frequently produced the opposite reaction in the receiver, discomfort and skepticism, while the person with the invisible disability experienced anxiety.

Disclosure is the most important step in the process. If the individual with a disability does not disclose disability status and accommodation need(s), then there is no obligation to accommodate on the part of the instructor, institution, or employer (P. L. 101-336). In other words, without a disclosure and request there is no accommodation communication. The amount of personal information disclosed varied among the student participants. Participants with visible disabilities sometimes needed only access to a building or classroom for a wheelchair, such as wide doorways or passageways without stairs. If the classroom was not accessible then a request was made. If the classroom was accessible nothing was said. A more complete disclosure including medical information was provided

by participants with invisible disabilities such as asthma, which impacted physical health, to reduce the skepticism of the instructor.

Several issues emerged surrounding disclosure: (a) making people feel more comfortable, (b) the negative impacts of attitudes and stereotyping, (c) the issue of power in the disclosure relationship, (d) reactions to disclosure, and (e) the process of understanding and articulating the disability (Rocco, 1997). As one participant with an invisible disability said, "When you tell people you have a learning disability for some reason that word is synonymous with stupid" (Reba 106). This feeling that instructors would think less of a student disclosing a learning disability was supported by comments faculty participants made.

Validation. Disclosure and request for accommodation can be made by an individual with a disability, but if it is not believed, an accommodation would not be made. Section 504 and the ADA require verification of the disability but do not define it. Verification is made through assessment procedures determined by disability services and the administration (Schuck & Kroeger, 1993). The administration is concerned with cost containment and serving officially diagnosed students.

Validation is the process a student goes through with an instructor to establish a right to accommodation. This is accomplished only when the instructor is satisfied the disability exists and the student is not trying "to take advantage of the system." For instance, some faculty participants were afraid that an individual without a disability might claim a learning disability to be permitted extra time for test taking. Three ways the instructor can seek validation of the claim are by (a) requesting written documentation verifying the disability or registration of the student with disability services, (b) calling disability services to verify information with a counselor, and (c) accepting the word of the student. Requesting documentation can be driven by the desire to follow procedure or by skepticism of student truthfulness. Some student participants handed instructors the documentation provided by disability services which stated the various accommodations needed, such as extended test taking time or a distraction free room. This documentation served as the disclosure, request, and validation. Other participants with visible disabilities rarely provided such documentation, believing what was or was not needed was evident by observing them.

When the instructor feels trusting students is important, then he or she is more likely to take at face value the information the student is disclosing. One faculty participant expressed his dismay with instructors who think students would falsely claim a disability, echoing the sentiments of participants with invisible disabilities who felt no one wants the negative stereotyping that comes with disclosing. When the instructor is satisfied that the disclosure and consequent request for accommodation are valid, acceptance of the disclosure has occurred. The instructor controls whether validation or acceptance of the disclosure occurs.

Requesting Accommodations. Request for accommodation is made by the individual needing the accommodation. This request can be directed towards an individual, a

department, or an institution. Participants in this study made their original request at the institutional level by notifying disability services. In most postsecondary institutions notification of disability services is required before any accommodations are provided. On the individual level, the instructor can request documentation of the disability. Once this is provided, the student is entitled to accommodations which have been determined by the counselor and the student. Another participant Sandy, had little understanding of what a doctoral program would entail so she handled the request for accommodations by bringing the "temporary advisor, and the director of graduate studies together with the person from disability services office" (Sandy 182-183).

Responsibility to Accommodate. Responsibility to accommodate a student begins with disclosure and the accommodation request. Responsibility to accommodate is a legal and financial obligation to make accommodations which were seen first as an institutional responsibility by all participants, even though they felt the responsibility for accommodations should be shared by the institution, disability services, the department, instructors, and students. One faculty participant (a lawyer) realized that he had a legal obligation and that he represented the institution. He spoke in terms of the rights of students with disabilities to access their education. Other participants did not seem to realize that faculty and their departments represent the institution. It was interesting that many faculty participants felt they would like to help, but accommodations really are the purview of disability services. These participants felt their home departments did not have the resources or time to provide accommodations. Another reason faculty participants did not see accommodations as the responsibility of faculty or the departments was a lack of knowledge of what do for a student. Some faculty participants described self directed learning projects engaged in to inform themselves about particular disabilities.

Other faculty participants considered accommodations one more burden the institution was placing on them. Some faculty participants spoke in terms of their right to deny an accommodation. The right to deny an accommodation came from the faculty participant's belief that he knew what was fair to him and to other students. This sentiment of fairness and personal rights was directed towards students with cognitive disabilities such as attention deficient or learning disabilities more often than those with visible disabilities. These disabilities are "suspect disabilities," meaning faculty participants expressed doubts as to whether they should be classified as disabilities.

Student participants registered with disability services as part of the admissions process or after diagnosis. Disability services was recognized as the institution's facilitator of accommodations by both students and faculty. Student participants utilized disability services for all accommodation needs until the office failed to make the accommodations. Student participants spoke of scribes for exams not being capable of writing mathematical symbols, or of books not being tape recorded well or in time. One participant didn't get his books recorded until the fifth week of class. Most often student participants felt they had a responsibility to see that their needs were met and to create innovative ways to access information. When disability services failed to provide adequate accommodations, student participants responded in a number of ways. Some left the main campus to take courses only at a regional branch. Other participants went to their major department and worked

out accommodations with the assistance of academic counselors and instructors; others recruited friends, relatives, or paid people to record written materials on tape.

Timing of the Request. Timing of the request for accommodation has implications for the student's credibility and the ability of the various entities involved to facilitate the accommodation. Timing can affect the reception of the disclosure, the accommodation request, and the responsibility to accommodate. The earlier a student discloses in the academic program or course, the more credible and "doable" is the request. Requests for accommodations ranged from some time during the quarter prior to course enrollment to the last weeks of a quarter. Faculty participants favorably remembered students who requested accommodations prior to the beginning of the quarter and on the first day of class. Two participants had experiences with students disclosing near the end of a course or program, one because of recent diagnosis and the other forced to when compensation skills failed him. Both faculty participants were frustrated, but the ability to do the work was questioned of the student with the recent diagnosis. A well documented request for accommodation can become suspect if the timing of the accommodation request seems inappropriate to the instructor. The farther into the quarter the disclosure occurs the greater the skepticism about the disability, the student's capability, and the necessity of the accommodation.

It was the end of the quarter and you just--it wasn't like she came in at the beginning of the quarter and said I have ADD and we had a quarter to sort of work through it. It was really like when the process was pretty much when the quarter was pretty much finished. I think she ended up taking an incomplete and I guess she did do - I can't really recall what happened after that. I think she did turn something in and I think it was fairly minimal. (Rod 116-123)

A student who is diagnosed just prior to the beginning of a course or at some time during the course is viewed with a lot of skepticism and suspicion. This student cannot articulate accommodation needs concisely and with any authority because the student is just learning about the disability, making the student appear incompetent and full of excuses for inadequate performance. For students with invisible disabilities this is more of a problem,

When she came in and almost had a look of ecstasy on her face because she had been diagnosed and that sort of explained it all--But this person was sort of like using it as an excuse for - suddenly there was all the answers why things weren't working for her and why you know. Maybe I could understand that up to a point because she was having some problems getting things done and so suddenly she sort of had a label or a reason but its as I've always said to my oldest son that might be an explanation but its not necessarily an excuse. What you do is find ways to compensate. I didn't say any of this to her because it was the end of the quarter. (Rod 112-118)

The timing of the accommodation request can be vital to any future relationship between the professor and student. If the student has to take multiple classes with a professor who is skeptical of the student's disclosure as either being accurate or honest, the ramifications can be enormous for the student's learning. Some students who are afraid of being judged as incompetent or inadequate put off disclosure until the last possible minute. A student and professor had worked together over the course of eleven years when the student disclosed under the duress of the final dissertation stage when chapters were being revised,

I'd be spending my weekends on it. And he'd get it back and he would do worse with the next draft and so I can remember a counseling session where I just got angry at him. I said you're expecting a lot from me and you're not delivering. You've got this schedule set up and I'm doing my load and what are you slacking off--this work is getting worse and that's when he informed me of his situation. (Bud 170-175)

The timing of the request affects the relationship between instructor and student. In the case of a recent diagnoses a student may not disclose at a time when the instructor will find the disclosure credible. In fact, the instructor may believe the student is making excuses for poor past performance. Other times students put off disclosing out of fear, shame or embarrassment, doing so only when confronted with poor performance. Timing can also affect each party's perception of the accommodation request and the expectations each has for the other's performance.

Negotiating Accommodations. Negotiating accommodations is the act of determining to what degree each party, the instructor and the student, finds the request and its compliance reasonable and adequate. The concept of negotiating accommodations emerged from conversations with faculty participants. According to one faculty participant, "It comes down... to the student and faculty member and I guess it has to almost be a negotiated sort of thing....Maybe a shared responsibility. Sort of a problem that people work collaboratively together" (Rod 362-363). Negotiation is thought of as a process that people engage in who each have something to offer the other party. In this case, faculty participants were more concerned with losing something such as academic freedom, decision-making control, academic standards, or time. For example, participants felt accommodating a student would take time away from their other duties, time they didn't want to waste. One faculty participant spoke of students with cognitive disabilities needing more guidance on writing assignments and believed this to be time taken away from other students. Rarely do faculty consider the benefits to other students in the class when some accommodations are made (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). One faculty participant did speak of changing his teaching style and becoming more aware of different senses because of his experience accommodating a student with a vision impairment.

Effective communication involves assigning each party responsibility which is understood as such by both. The student is usually requesting an academic accommodation and will provide the instructor with the necessary information. Faculty participants indicated that

the student was the primary source of information about the disability and necessary accommodations,

They need to be able to tell me what they need. They should know what they need and they just need to - if they want to discuss that with me I'll be glad to sit down and we can talk about what would be helpful to them. But all they have to do is just tell me what they want and I'll get it for them. (Jim 79-82)

Some instructors like the one quoted above were willing to "get it for them" while others expressed the idea that accommodations were negotiated between the student who knew how the disability manifested itself and the instructor who knew the course material,

I'd have to take my cue from her. She'd have to have a sense to know what to ask for. ...She came in and said I have a problem and I know it's been a problem in every class and it was a problem the last time I had you but I don't know what to do. I could certainly make some suggestions. I'm pretty good at saying would it help if we break things into smaller chunks and have you turn in something on a week-by-week basis where everybody else is turning in twice a quarter? (Rod 263-271)

For others, additional information about the necessary accommodations would be the responsibility of an agency. For instance,

Typically [a student] comes to me very well prepared for the conversation. They have a letter from the office of student disability services. They are prepared to give me a phone number if I need to call and talk to someone. (Jeb 278-281)

Implications for Adult Education. Adults with disabilities increasingly participate in a variety of adult education programs, making the process of communicating accommodation needs important to know and understand. The accommodation communication discussed here can occur in all types of adult education programs from community education to corporate training. Adults who do not know how to effectively communicate these needs may experience increased discrimination and limited education and employment opportunities. Adult educators who react negatively to disclosure may find that these students leave their programs.

Frequently disability is glossed over if mentioned at all in conversations about diversity and multiculturalism, we need to increase opportunities for discussion of disability issues. First, include accommodation statements on all course syllabi (Rocco, 1995). As the instructor covers the syllabus during the first class, this statement will be seen by all. Thus creating an atmosphere for students to discuss differences in learning styles and accessing information. Students with and without disabilities benefit from learning about different ways to access information. Second, course packets should include relevant material on disability issues or

experiences. Third, once a disclosure has been made to an instructor, the instructor can take this opportunity to practice the accommodation communication. This is helpful to students with invisible disabilities whose opportunities to practice disclosure techniques are limited (Rocco, 1997). Disability disclosures done ineffectively, without ready suggestions for accommodation, and poorly timed increase the likelihood of further stereotyping and discrimination (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). These suggestions will provide opportunities to discuss disability issues helping adults with disabilities feel that their experience is important. It may also begin to change attitudes and stereotyping of other members of the class or faculty.

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*(The entire list of references will be given out at the presentation.)